

# Stone age returns as Khartoum starves the Nuba

One of Africa's oldest cultures is caught in the middle of Sudan's civil war. **Peter Moszynski** reports on their long wait for the UN relief effort to arrive

**B**EYOND the reach of the United Nations humanitarian airlift Operation Lifeline Sudan, the Nuba Mountains have become one of the most isolated places on earth.

The rebel-held area in the province of South Kordofan — historically part of north Sudan — is about the size of Scotland and home to 500,000 people, whom the government is trying to starve into submission.

But the 50 or so Nuba tribes caught in the middle of the 15-year civil war are determined to maintain their African culture and traditions in the face of Khartoum's attempts to impose the Arabised conformity required by its idea of an Islamic state.

The result of a 10-year blockade has been the reversion to a virtually stone age existence. Most Nuba have never seen an oil lamp or torch, let alone an electric light.

Many have no clothes, while others wear patchwork rags scarcely recognisable as garments.

But the Nuba have always had tremendous reserves of self-reliance, and they derive strength from adversity.

The barren hillsides constantly echo to the sound of music as people sing and dance. They also maintain local traditions such as wrestling and stick fighting.

Everything is recycled: captured anti-tank mines are turned into guitars, and the remnants of the bomb casings dropped in air raids are transformed into agricultural tools.

In this siege economy, every spare yard of ground has been prepared for cultivation before the expected rains.

In some of the rockier areas, where no stone has

been left unturned in the search for cultivable land, the effect is a chessboard mosaic of shifted rocks.

The entire landscape has been subtly changed by human activity, for the Nuba have learnt over the centuries how to grow every possible pound of grain without losing the precious topsoil and its vital nutrients.

Nuba farming techniques — like their culture — have been shaped by the need to escape incursions by the neighbouring Mysseria Baggara Arabs, who have long sought the fertile valleys for their valuable pastures.

Nowadays the land grab has become institutionalised, part of a war of attrition by government soldiers and allied militia who raze entire villages, driving the locals into government "peace villages".

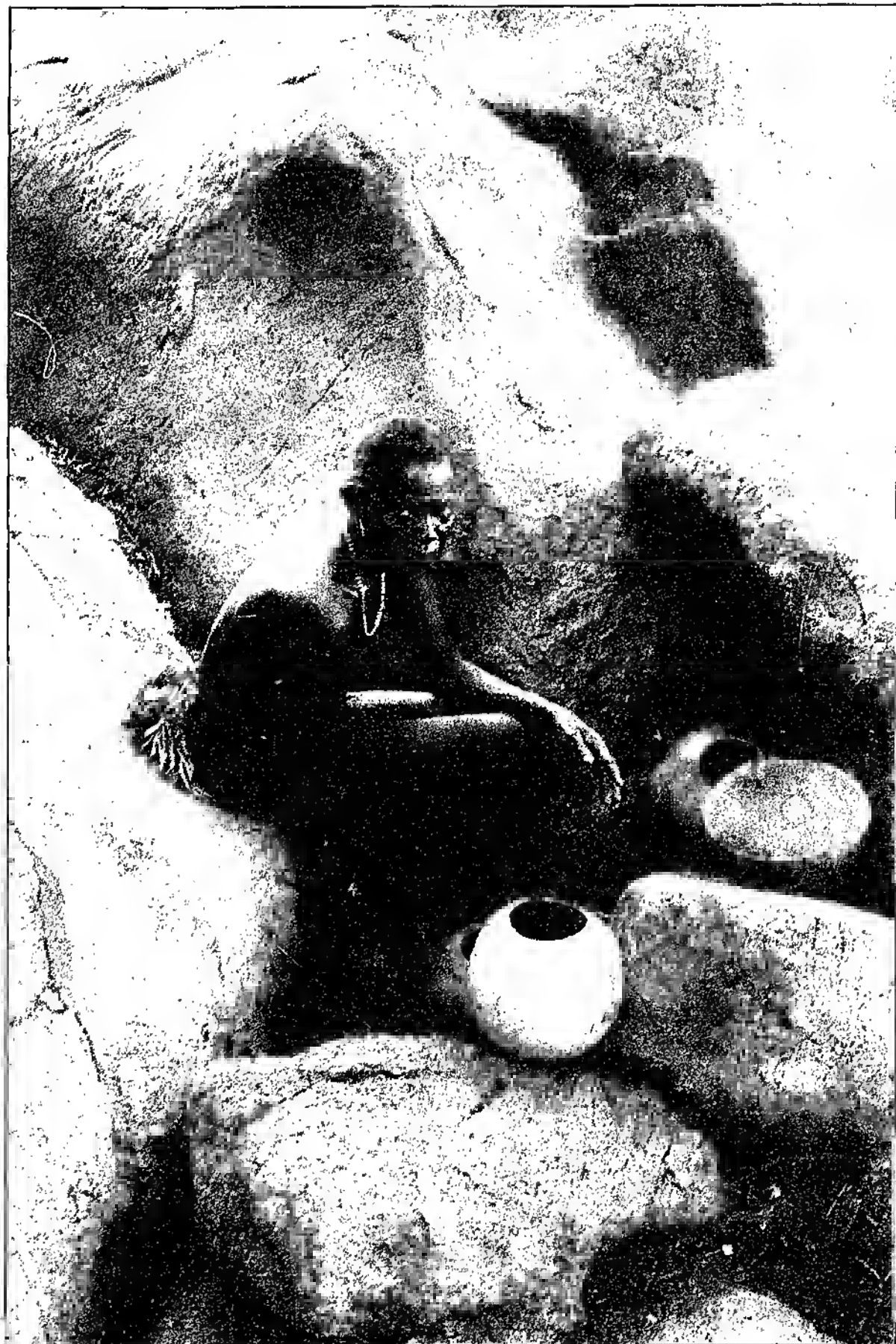
Displaced farmers have their land confiscated and sold on to absentee landlords who wreak havoc on the local environment by trying to use unsuitable mechanised agricultural techniques.

Those who have fled to the government side in search of food are often forced to work as indentured labour, supplying the army garrisons with harvests from their own confiscated land.

Because the mountains are north of the 1956 border between north and south Sudan, they are one of the few parts of the country not reached by the humanitarian airlift.

Many people see the UN's failure to get to the rebel areas of the north as collusion in the government's attempts to starve the Nuba.

In May the UN was finally given approval for an Operation Lifeline Sudan assessment mission. Staff from the local Nuba Relief Rehabilitation and Development Soci-



The Nuba tribes are resisting Khartoum's attempts to impose an Arabised conformity

ety, who have been struggling to support their tribes, were braced for an influx of the foreign experts and aid workers who appear ever eager to be the first to reach any crisis areas.

But the assessment has again been denied permission this month, despite the assurances of the foreign minister, Mohammed Osman Ismael, to the UN secretary-general, Kofi Annan.

In the meantime, the government is doing all it can to disrupt even the limited relief that has begun to arrive, courtesy of a small consortium of agencies flying aid to the mountains in an ex-RAF

transport plane that used to belong to the Queen's flight.

Before its clandestine relief operations, the Hawker Siddeley 748 used to ferry the royal corgis around.

The airstrips are bombed and shelled, aid planes are shot at, relief workers sometimes killed.

Early last month two World Food Programme workers and a member of the Sudanese Red Crescent were killed near the main garrison town of Kadugli as they returned from distributing food to government-controlled peace villages.

Although there is little famine yet, a food crisis looms

unless extra relief arrives.

Because recent government attacks have displaced 25,000 people from the valleys, there are virtually no food reserves left, and not enough to last the few months until the next harvest — assuming the rains come.

Local officials fear that, unless additional food arrives from outside, people will be faced with an impossible dilemma: to stay and risk starvation, or to move to government areas and be stripped of their culture and dignity.

If nothing is done, one of Africa's oldest and most intriguing cultures may disappear for ever.